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ABSTRACT

A total of 26 preschools and day care centers in Saint Leo, Florida indicated the extent to which they were involved in teaching prereading and reading skills, when a questionnaire listing 50 reading and related activities was sent to 54 local centers. Respondents were instructed to indicate whether they engaged in the listed activities frequently, sometimes, or never. Overall, findings indicated that the day care centers and preschools appeared to be implementing appropriate prereading activities. Discussion emphasizes the importance of developmentally appropriate activities, and recommendations are offered for guiding the introduction of prereading into the preschool setting. (RH)

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PRE-READING AND READING SKILLS IN PRE-SCHOOLS

A Preliminary Study

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by

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PRE-READING AND READING SKILLS IN PRE-SCHOOLS

A Preliminary Study

There are some private schools that in order to get into the first grade, a child must pass a reading test. Formerly, to learn to read was the main reason for going to school, not something that was a prerequisite. Today the teaching of reading is starting with younger and younger children. What was once considered appropriate for first grade is now kindergarten fare and what was taught in kindergarten is being taught in pre-schools.

To find out just what was going on, I examined some skills which are related to reading and determined which of them are pre-reading skills and which are direct reading skills. Then I prepared a list of such skills, sent them to 54 local pre-schools and day care centers. Twenty-six of the centers graciously responded, almost half. Tabulations of the responses indicated that most of the pre-schools are engaged in teaching pre-reading skills while only a few are spending time on full reading skills. The pressures to teach reading, however, are very strong and many pre-schools are trying to come to terms with a philosophy of pre-school education which is based on solid psychological knowledge. It was hopeed that this reseach, although only a preliminary study, would be useful in helping pre-school personnel to determine appropriate skills to be taught.

Subjects

The fifty-four day care centers and pre-schools which were the subjects of this research are a diverse group. Some call themselves day-care centers and take not only pre-school children, but also other children after school hours. Some even take infants who, of course, are only marginally involved in any of the activities that we were concerned with. Others call themselves pre-schools and concentrate on children aged three and four, although they may have a few younger or older than that. These centers were selected for this study because they were on the list of early childhood centers. This list excluded kindergartens that form part of a regular public or private school. Thus each of these centers is private and not connected to any formal school system. Some are church-related, others are part of a national chain, and still others are completely independent. None of the centers on this list are state-supported in any way.

It was decided to choose these centers because of a desire to localize the research. Rather than randomly sample day care or early childhood programs throughout the state, for example, it was thought that it might be more useful to focus on what is being done in a local area. It was hoped that the information derived from this research would be useful to these centers which are neighbors to us at Saint Leo College. When the questionnaires were sent out, respondents had the opportunity to indicate whether or not they would like a copy

of the finished result. At least half of the respondents so indicated; this shows an interest in these pre-reading skills.

Table 1 lists pre-reading and reading skills according to categories. The questionnaire sent out to the centers listed these skills, but not in this order. The personnel at the centers were asked to indicate whether they engaged in them frequently (mark 1), sometimes (mark 2), or never (mark 3). Results are shown on Table 2.

Table 1

Skills Examined

Prereading Skills

Alphabet Skills

- Reciting the alphabet
- Identifying letters of the alphabet
- Writing letters of the alphabet
- Learning sounds of letters

Oral Skills

- Talking about pictures
- Singing songs with motions
- Reciting poems
- Telling stories
- Show and tell time
- Telling jokes
- Talking on the telephone
- Learning new words (orally)
- Talking about stories that have been read
- Tongue-twisters
- Acting out plays
- Using puppets

Listening skills

- Reading to children

Television Programs

- Watching Sesame Street on TV
- Watching Electric Company on TV

Writing

- Drawing
- Writing names
- Making cards for celebrations

Left to Right sequence

- Distinguishing left from right
- Going from left to right

Language Experience

- Taking field trips
- Talking about field trips
- Writing about field trips
- Reading about field trips
- Making records of daily weather

Visual Discrmination

Distinguishing like and different pictures
Distinguishing almost alike pictures
Distinguishing like and different letters
Identifying colors
Identifying shapes

Auditory Discrimination

Distinguishing like and different sounds

Beginning Word Skills

Name tags
Labels on objects
Pictures with names and stories

Thinking skills

Putting pictures in sequential order
Putting objects into categories
Putting pictures of objects into categories
Playing guessing games
Riddles

Reading Skills

Decoding

Learning simple sight words
Sounding out words
Drilling Dolch words
Using flash cards of words
Looking up words in dictionaries

Actual Reading

Reading stories back that have been read to them
Using reading series

Table 2

Pre-Reading and Reading Skills engaged in Day-care and pre-school centers

SKILL	Frequently	Sometimes	Never
1. Recite Alphabet	16	9	0
2. Identify Letters	21	6	0
3. Write Letters	18	7	1
4. Learn Sounds of Letters	20	6	0
5. Talk about Pictures	22	3	0
6. Watch Sesame Street	2	4	19
7. Watch Electric Company	1	3	22
8. Write Names	17	6	2
9. Tell Left from Right	22	4	0
10. Go from Left to Right	19	6	1
11. Take field Trips	5	15	6
12. Talk about Field Trips	11	9	6
13. Write about Field Trips	4	10	12
14. Read about Field Trips	5	10	10
15. Tell Different Pictures	18	7	0
16. Tell almost alike	17	8	1
17. Tell Different Letters	18	8	0
18. Hear Different Sounds	15	12	0
19. Sing Songs	24	2	0
20. Recite Poems	18	5	3
21. Tell Stories	23	3	0
22. Show and Tell	15	9	2
23. Tell Jokes	7	14	5
24. Talk on Telephone	8	17	2
25. New Oral Words	21	5	0
26. Drawing with Pencils	24	2	0
27. Name Tags	21	4	1
28. Label Classroom Items	11	8	7
29. Baby Picturs and Names	2	10	14
30. Read to Children	26	0	0
31. Reading back to Adults	6	10	10
32. Talk about Stories	21	5	0
33. Learn simple Sight Words	17	7	2
34. Sound out Words	14	8	4
35. Pictures in Sequence	17	7	2
36. Objects into Categories	19	6	1
37. Pictures into Categories	17	6	3
38. Play Guessing Games	15	10	1
39. Make up Riddles	3	14	8
40. Recite Tongue-twisters	3	16	7
41. Identify Colors	26	0	0
42. Identify simple Shapes	26	0	0
43. Make records of Weather	8	13	5
44. Make Cards	23	2	0
45. Act out Plays	10	10	4
46. Use Puppets	9	12	4
47. Use Reading Series	10	0	15
48. Drill Dolch Words	1	4	17
49. Drill with Flash Cards	7	7	11
50. Use Dictionary	2	8	16

Results

As can be seen from Table 2, there were a few activities which were engaged in frequently by every single day-care center or pre-school. These were No. 30, Reading to Children, No. 41, Identifying Colors, and No. 42, Identifying Simple Shapes. Those three have all been common practices in Kindergartens and pre-schools so it is not surprising that they should be used here. That is not to belittle their importance, however; indeed, it has been shown through research that reading to children, for example, is one of the most valuable activities that adults can engage in with children at any age, but especially with these young children. The other two skills which were so commonly engaged in are both visual discrimination skills, important pre-reading skills.

Other activities which showed very high practice were the following: No. 19, Singing Songs (24 centers practiced this frequently and 2 at least sometimes); No. 26, Drawing with Pencils (24 frequently and 2 sometimes); No. 44, Making Cards for Celebrations (23 frequently, 2 sometimes); No. 21, Telling Stories (23 frequently, 3 sometimes; No. 5 Talking about Pictures (22 frequently, 3 sometimes); and No. 9, Telling Left from Right (22 frequently, 4 sometimes). Of these six, half are oral skills, while two others are in the category of writing skills, with the other one in the left to right sequence. Again, all of these have been commonly recognized as important pre-reading skills.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, this research showed certain activities which only small numbers of pre-schools and day care centers engaged in. The two activities which involved watching television, Nos. 6 and 7 were engaged in only rarely. Two others that had low use scores were Nos. 48 and 50, Drilling Dolch Words and Using the Dictionary respectively. In addition, No. 29, Putting up Baby Pictures with Names and Stories was engaged in only sometimes by less than half of the respondants and only 2 did it regularly. These numbers are not surprising; in fact, they are encouraging for the kinds of activities that day-care centers and pre-school ought to be engaged in.

First of all, although "Sesame Street" and "The Electric Company" are fine educational programs, it is to be hoped that the lack of these programs indicates that the day-care personnel do not employ watching television as a regular activity for the children. We know that children can learn much from good televison programs, but television is still a passive instrument, compared to the active participation that good pre-school personnnel require of the children.

Concerning the use of the Dolch word cards or the dictionary, the results there are also encouraging. The Dolch words are well known as a list of words that commonly appear in children's readers and trade books. The cards might form an excellent check list of common elementary book words, but the purpose of the list was never that they be drilled systematically. In fact, drilling words isolated from context is not particularly useful. It is encouraging, therefore, to

see that few pre-schools engage in such activities. Using the dictionary is, of course, an important learning skill. However, using the dictionary requires that one have a full acquaintance with the sequence of letters of the alphabet, as well as a rather large vocabulary. Nevertheless, there are a few picture dictionaries for young children which give an excellent introduction to dictionary use. As to No. 29, Putting up Baby Pictures Names and Little Stories, it is not surprising that this is done frequently by only a few day-care centers and pre-schools. It is an activity that school personnel tend to do only occasionally. Here we see that 10 centers engage in this particular activity sometimes, while 14 never do it.

There were other activities which, although few pre-school personnel engaged in them frequently, many did sometimes. These included such activities as No. 11, Taking Field Trips, No. 23, Telling Jokes, No. 8, Talking on the Telephone, No. 39, Making up Riddles, and No. 40, Reciting Tongue-Twisters.

Among the more valuable activities that constitute pre-reading practices are those which relate to language experience. Those include No. 11, Taking Field Trips, No. 12, Talking about Field Trips, No. 13, Writing about Field Trips, No. 14, Reading about Field Trips, and No. 43, Making Records about the Weather. The first four are, of course, closely connected. Students take field trips, they come back to the center and talk about them, they make up sentences together with the adult who writes them down (or helps the children

write them), and then the children, with the help of their teacher, read them back. In each case more than half of centers who responded indicated that they performed these activities frequently or sometimes. The one least practiced was the Writing about Field Trips, although even there 14 of the 26 respondents indicated that they practiced that at least sometimes. No. 43, Making Records of the Weather, is also a Language Experience Activity which was practiced by the majority of the centers (8 frequently and 13 sometimes).

It is important for us to look at the skills that are reading skills, per se. These include all of the decoding skills as well as actual reading. Two of the decoding skills, No. 33, Learning Simple Sight Words, and No. 34, Sounding out Words, both had a fairly high number of respondents who indicated that they performed these activities frequently (17 and 14 respectively) and quite a few more sometimes (7 and 8 respectively). Thus for the most part, day-care centers and pre-schools are indeed doing activities that are not merely pre-reading, but actual reading skills of decoding words. We have already noted that the other three decoding skills, No. 48, Drilling Dolch Words, No. 49, Drilling with Flash Cards, and No. 50, Using Dictionaries are rarely done regularly.

In spite of commonly teaching word decoding skills, less than half centers do actual reading in reading series. Ten use them frequently and the rest never use them. The practice of reading stories to children and having them read them back was done frequently by 6 centers and sometimes by 10. Ten others never followed that practice. They may have seen such a

practice as non-productive. Certainly they read to the children (all respondents indicated that they did), but they saw no need to have the children read back to them. After all, how would the children know all the words? This is a valid question on fairly difficult material but in simple material it works quite well, as we have seen in the section on language experience.

Overall, it is clear that day-care centers and pre-schools seem to be doing the kinds of pre-reading skills that are most appropriate to the age level of the children who attend them.

Discussion

Day care centers and pre-schools have a golden opportunity. They are becoming more and more necessary as more and more mothers enter the work force. The personnel have the children there for long hours every day, in some cases, even as much as ten or twelve hours. Not only do the personnel of these centers have large amounts of time with the children, but they are also free of the constraints and requirements of the structured school system. They are able to make maximum use of the time they have. The time certainly ought not to be spent solely on academic subjects, but surely it is important that the time that is spent on academics be well spent. Since these children are pre-schoolers they should definitely be learning pre-school skills, including these most important pre-reading skills. Yet the teaching of these pre-reading skills is less important than the manner in which they are taught. We want to develop good readers who will enjoy a lifetime of reading. We do not want to do anything that will jeopardize the pleasure and joy of reading. It is important, therefore, to examine pre-reading skills in the light of the child's natural development.

We need to remember that each child develops at his or her own natural speed. We cannot treat all children as if they are at exactly the same level of readiness, even though some children may be exactly the same age. Day care centers and pre-schools have the rare privilege of being able to make

allowances for these differences in children. There is no course of study that each child must complete before he or she may "graduate" from the day care center.

Furthermore, since we want children to learn that reading is the key to opening all the pleasures of books, we want those first experiences with books to be delightful and enjoyable. Drilling beyond the time when it is "fun" for the children or spending time on activities which are beyond the children's ability will only frustrate them. They will learn early that the key to books is a painful one and they will want to avoid it in the future. It would be a catastrophe to turn a child off on reading before he or she even reaches regular school.

It has been established through research that many children can learn to read already at age three. But one must remember that no child aged three <u>needs</u> to learn to read and those who are ready will certainly let you know. Children have a marvelous way of doing just that. When they are ready to learn something, they are able to do it easily. In fact, a rule of thumb could be that if it is hard for the child, don't do it. These pre-school years are the years of play for children. They will learn a great deal, but most of it is done under the heading of play. Let us not turn play into work!

Recommendations

The following are recommended to the personnel of day care centers and pre-schools:

1. All of the activities listed as pre-reading skills are appropriate for the pre-school level, but they are not required. They should be engaged in only insofar as the children can handle them. If children find them difficult, they should be omitted.

2. Avoid making the pre-school just a younger edition of the elementary school. Pre-school and day-care times are the last opportunities for children to learn through playing.

3. All work done with pre-reading skills should be pleasant and comfortable for the children (and for the personnel).

4. The most important skill (and recognized as such by the respondents to this questionnaire) is reading to the children. This should be done every day without fail.

5. Treat children as individuals. Fortunately in early childhood centers there is no list of competencies mandated by the state that each child must know.